

A New Kind of Sanctuary ©

**A sermon preached by the Rev. Lee Bluemel
At The North Parish of North Andover, Unitarian Universalist
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“To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger.” –James Baldwin

*“The day comes when remaining the same becomes more painful than the risk to grow.”
– Phoebe Eng*

“Only a person who risks is free.” – Janet Rand

Two Sundays ago, during the worship service,
a rock was thrown through a stained glass window
at the First Unitarian Universalist Church of New Orleans.

No one was hurt—the window was in the wall of their Memorial Hall,
and a member found the brick and broken glass while the service was underway.
But still, it is sad, because it is a beautiful stained glass window,
depicting a chalice of subtle hues- as some of you have seen on FaceBook.
It was made by a UU from Virginia who had helped the congregation rebuild
after Hurricane Katrina, and wanted to help tell the story of their recovery.

The best guess about why the brick was heaved
is that the church was the site of a well-publicized Transgender Town Hall
two days before, hosted by Transitions Louisiana,
a group that supports transgender people.
The gathering was in response to a much greater tragedy than a broken window-
the murder of two African-American trans women, age 25 and 31,
in two separate crimes, two weeks earlier in the New Orleans area.

We all need sanctuaries, refuges, places where we feel safe-
safe to be ourselves, safe to speak out, safe enough to be honest about who we are.
We need places where we can be honest about what we believe and how we struggle.
We need places to make new connections, to be vulnerable,
to explore new ideas and take risks.
In today's rushed and fragmented and violent world,
we need places that shelter us from the storm,
where we can let our guard down and just breathe, and sing, and be.
And some of us need safe places just to stay alive.

Sometimes I wish that our kind of sanctuary- where all are welcome-
could embrace the whole world.

When I think of those two young women from New Orleans,
or other people who have lost their lives
because society did not protect them from violence or indifference,
a rock thrown through a window isn't such a big deal after all.

In fact, we UUs have a great story to prove just that.
The famous 18th century Universalist the Rev. John Murray
was giving a lecture in Boston when a rock went through a window.
Fortunately, it did not clobber him but landed on the floor.
As the story goes, he picked it up and said to his audience,
"This argument is solid and weighty, but it is neither rational or convincing."

What a great line!
God forbid anyone throws a rock through one of our windows someday,
but if they do, I figure we'll be ready.
We already know what to say, right? Will you repeat it after me?
"This argument is solid and weighty..."
"...but it is neither rational or convincing."
Great. If I forget you'll have to remind me.

Of course, even if you prepare yourself,
it is unsettling when your safe space, your sanctuary, is threatened or shattered.
This is why those who share our status as a religious minority in our nation
have been in my heart--
our Muslim brothers and sisters whose mosques received threats,
and our Jewish brothers and sisters as well.

The first week in March, there was a sixth wave of bomb threats
that hit Jewish institutions across the country,
including two elementary schools in Newton and Framingham.
These are K-3 and K- 8 schools. At one of the schools it was Pajama Day.
Imagine getting a call that your Kindergartner, in their pjs,
has been evacuated due to a bomb threat.
Since January, 130 synagogues and Jewish schools have received such threats.

We all need sanctuary space.
But society and politics, our identities and life experience
determine who is most in need.

As Unitarian Universalists, we recognize this-
and it is a big part of the reason why we create and sustain congregations
where all are welcome, whether we're atheist, agnostic, pagan or Humanist,
Theist, Universalist Christian, Jewish UU or Buddhist,
followers of natural or process theology, or curious, wide-ranging seekers.
In this Sanctuary, those who've been hurt or shaped by bad theology
can recover and reclaim their birthright of self-acceptance and joy.

We offer physical sanctuary to so many—AA and AlAnon,
the youth of McVagly, the Great Pond Sangha and all sorts of Small Groups.
We offer welcome no matter whom we love or how our families came to be,
what we look like or where we work or our gender identity.
And here at North Parish, we create smaller safe spaces
for those grieving or aging, for those struggling with mental health or addiction

or living with those who do.

We create smaller safe spaces for the children and youth, who have real struggles of their own.

We all need refuge at some point in life.

But this refuge comes with a risk—the risk that once safe, we can get used to being comfortable, feeling protected—to enjoying our own little Paradise while forgetting that others are still living in the “at risk” zone.

As Unitarian Universalists, despite our Universalist forebears, we can be quite uncomfortable with the idea of evangelism—with going out into the streets to bring others to the fold.

So we may be even *more* at risk than others to a serious temptation: the temptation to simply be content in our own refuge.

Yet we *also* have a history of seizing opportunities to gather our hard won empowerment and moral courage and extend what we have received to others.

Growth requires safety, but also requires risk.

So as people of faith, we engage in a continual conversation and calculation:

How do we strike a balance between safety and risk in our personal lives?

What about in our society? Our spiritual, ethical or religious lives?

How do we respond to those who no longer have a reliable refuge—

whose nations or homes or schools or religious communities are no longer safe?

How can we become a portable sanctuary,

a people like the Jews who carried their ark in the wilderness,

so we can go where we need to go, bringing our offer of refuge with us?

To be worth its salt, every congregation must continually ask itself who are our neighbors, where is the most need, and how are we called *right now*, in our *local context*, to love those who are most at risk of suffering or fragmentation.

We happen to be a congregation whose members come from the rural, suburban and urban communities of the Merrimack Valley. Our Meeting House is located about 3 miles from the Immigrant City, the City of Bread and Roses, the city of Lawrence, a multi-ethnic city built on immigrant labor.

It is a city known for the Bread and Roses strike of 1912, when a group of mostly female, ethnically diverse immigrants went on strike against inadequate pay. The strikers came from 20 nations, 65% lived in the U.S. for less than ten years. The opposition didn't think they would stick together, working across lines of language and ethnicity, but they did. They persisted.

It is still an immigrant city, now close to 80% Latino. Some residents are first generation; others are many generations removed from another country. Some are documented, some are undocumented and thus guilty of a *civil*- not criminal- offense, an offense similar to loitering or driving without a license. Many are scared.

Even though Lawrence is a Trust Act city whose Police Chief and Mayor support the agreement that local law enforcement resources will not be used to do the work of federal immigration officials, some folks are terrified, their children not sleeping at night and afraid to go to school, afraid that they might never see their parents again if they do. They've heard the stories.

They've heard the stories of people like Guadalupe Garcia de Reyes, the 36 year old mother of two US citizen children, who dutifully reported to an immigration office in Arizona for an annual check-in and was then separated from her family and sent to Mexico.

She came to the U.S. when she was 14 and hasn't lived in Mexico in 22 years. Her two children were among those trying to block the van that took her away. They then had to pack a suitcase to send to her in Mexico.

Or Juan Carlos Hernandez Pacheco, a longtime resident in Southern Illinois, a successful restaurant owner and beloved by all including the mayor and police, who was sent to a detention center in Missouri without trial and without notice, leaving behind his wife, a citizen, and three children under 8 years old. In cases like this, deportation clearly has nothing to do with public safety, and everything to do with ripping families apart.

There are 5 million US households with *US citizen children* where *at least one parent is undocumented*--
5 million families at risk of a sudden, unpredictable forced separation. It is no wonder that these parents and children feel they have no refuge left.

In response to such stories and to the moral failure of our broken immigration system, a coalition of secular and religious people are taking part in a new movement to stand in solidarity with immigrants, called the Sanctuary Movement. It is not entirely new of course; North Parish was involved in Sanctuary efforts in the 1970's, when the congregation helped to host a Vietnamese family for a time, as did the UU congregation where I grew up.

The New Sanctuary movement began way back in 2007, but it has had new life breathed into it over the past several months. The First Unitarian Society of Denver was the first church to gain publicity, when Jeanette Vizaguerra took sanctuary there recently. She has been in the U.S. for 20 years, and has three kids who are 6,10 and 12.

Jeanette is not in hiding, but is taking a public, moral stance against Immigration and Customs Enforcement practices. She wants to have her case resolved, but she is also speaking out

on behalf of other immigrants at risk.

There is some hope; all but one of the 18 sanctuary cases that have happened in churches nationwide since 2014 have been successful.

For two years, our sister congregation in Bedford has been in discernment about offering physical sanctuary, and our sister congregation in Haverhill, led by the Rev. Frank Clarkson, is also moving in this direction.

If they do so, they will need our support and help.

There is a lot to learn and understand, much more than can be conveyed in a sermon. Our Sanctuary Task Force is offering a Listening Circle today about North Parish becoming a Sanctuary Ally congregation. There will also be information at the Rapid Response table, a way to sign up if you want to get involved on an individual level, and we'll be sharing links to information in the weekly Enews.

Our sister congregations and our denomination have much to share. From 2010- 2014, there was a denomination-wide Study/Action issue called Immigration as a Moral Issue, and in 2013, a denominational Statement of Conscience by the same name. In a 2010 article in the UU World magazine, Daniel Stracka laid out in some detail why Immigration is a Moral Issue. More recently, 13,000 UUs have signed the UUA's Declaration of Conscience.

Being a Sanctuary ally can mean much more than standing in solidarity with those in danger of immediate deportation. There is a spectrum of actions that individual members and the congregation as a whole might decide to engage in- such as holding forums to educate ourselves and the public about immigration issues and current state law,

meeting with local Selectmen and Representatives,
showing up for the May 1st Day without Immigrants event in Lawrence.

It could mean work to pass the Safe Communities Act,
which would prevent use of state dollars to deport families or create a Muslim Registry.
On Friday, four of us met with State Representative Juana Matias, a sponsor of the bill.
She had just met with Police Chief Brian Kyes, Chief of the Chelsea police department,
a licensed attorney and President of the Mass Major City Chiefs association.
He is thoroughly behind this legislation and leading education efforts for other chiefs.

Chief Kyes knows it is illegal under Mass state law to arrest someone
with undocumented status without probable cause- that to do so is unconstitutional.
I suspect he also feels that the argument that assisting federal immigration agents
will increase public safety may be solid and weighty,
but is neither rational or convincing.

Chief Kyes wants to use local law enforcement to fight crime-
not separate families.
But he can't change minds alone.
He needs people who are organized, strategic and can build momentum...
which sounds like church people to me!

The question facing us is whether or not we are called, at this time,
to bring our commitment to providing a refuge and safety into the streets.
The question is whether North Parish will become an active participant
in the New Sanctuary Movement.

We don't have to figure this out in isolation.
There are many who are far ahead of us in studying
the moral and legal issues of immigration.
And some among us are busy educating themselves and the rest of us.
I'd like to ask-- will those who are members of the Sanctuary Task Force who are here,
or have signed up to respond as individuals, please stand for a moment,
so folks can see you? Thanks to you all.

You know, I don't usually do this, but I'm going to give you a quiz this morning, and see if anyone remembers what we said at the beginning of the sermon, about what we'll say if a brick ever goes through one of our windows. Anyone remember? *"This argument is solid and weighty... ..but it is neither rational or convincing."*

Murray went on to say, after it was suggested it might be too dangerous to continue speaking, *"Not all the stones in Boston, except they stop my breath, shall shut my mouth or arrest my testimony!"*

Part of our testimony, like Murray's, is Universalism—that we wish for all beings to be happy and holy, and that the purpose of our congregations is to help life on earth reflect the wider Love of God, the movement of the Spirit of Love. Part of our purpose is to usher in a Beloved Community, the kingdom of God, an Interdependent Web of Flourishing Life— not just here in our Meeting House, but here on our local streets, here on earth.

May our commitment to truth and the spirit of love guide us, in all that we do.

Amen.

Words to begin Meditation:

Buddhists have a practice of taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha—the teacher, the teachings and the practicing community.

Where do you take refuge?

Where do you find refuge, physically, emotionally, spiritually, ethically, religiously? As we enter into meditation today, as you wish I invite you to reflect on these things.

UU minister, the Rev. Jonipher Kwong suggests:

*"We take refuge in all that is holy.
We take refuge in sacred teachings through the ages.
We take refuge in our community of faith.
We take refuge in the interdependent web of life."*